

the emotional feeling came within me that someone owed this debt to our beloved President to save her the ordeal of coming back," Ruby said. "I don't know why that came through my mind."⁵⁹

As for the possibility that Ruby and Oswald knew each other, the Commission categorically ruled it out.

... [T]here have been numerous specific allegations that Oswald was seen in the company of Ruby prior to November 22, often at Ruby's Carousel Club. All such allegations have been investigated, but the Commission has found none which merits credence.

In all but a few instances where the Commission was able to trace the claim to its source, the person responsible for the report either denied making it or admitted that he had no basis for the original allegation. Frequently those responsible for the allegations have proved to be persons of erratic memory or dubious mental stability.⁶⁰

The Commission also gave little credence to suggestions that Ruby might have had ties to organized crime. A short section in the Warren Report was dedicated to the subject. In it, the Commission stated that any links Ruby may have had with the mob were undoubtedly limited to the professional gamblers who frequented his clubs. Law enforcement agencies, the Commission wrote, had thoroughly investigated the matter and were satisfied that Ruby was in no way affiliated with La Cosa Nostra families then operating in the United States.

As he finished reading the Warren Report, Howard Donahue was no more inclined to believe the Commission's critics than before. The Commission's exhaustive account of the events and people in Dallas seemed more than sufficient in his mind to resolve any doubts that may have existed.

Still, fairness required that he examine both sides of the story. He knew that for his *True* article to be credible, he would have to deal with the arguments made by those who did not believe the government's explanation of the killing.

And so, buying a little more time from his editor, Donahue found every book he could on the assassination and started to read.

3

THE CRITICS

FOR ALL OF DONAHUE'S CONFIDENCE IN THE Warren Report, he and others like him were fast becoming a minority by the mid-1960s. A survey conducted by *The Washington Post* in October 1966 found that 60 percent of the American people rejected the "main arguments" of the Warren Commission's findings and had "deep and abiding doubts about the official explanation" of the assassination.¹ This skepticism was driven by, and in turn, driving, a tremendous amount of written material about Kennedy's death. By the time Donahue began his research, dozens of articles and close to twenty books had been written on the murder.² Most were sharply critical of the Warren Report.

In tone and content, the books ranged from the sensationalistic to the scholarly, while their titles often reflected competing conspiracy theories that seemed to mushroom monthly in the dark, uncertain aftermath of the shooting: *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?*, *The Second Oswald, Inquest, Whitewash I—The Report on the Warren Report*, *Whitewash II—The FBI—Secret Service Cover-Up*, *Rush to Judgment*, *The Bastard Bullet*. *not in these books*

Alleged conspirators ranged from disgruntled Cubans to the Russians to the Central Intelligence Agency, organized crime, right-wing fanatics, or any combination of the above. Writers sustained these theories with what they claimed were a host of unanswered questions, bizarre coincidences and outright contradictions in the Warren Commission's findings. The red flags emerged after reporters and writers began scrutinizing the Commission's twenty-six volumes of transcripts and evidence and after they started talking to witnesses the Commission chose not to hear.

One of the areas of greatest doubt centered on what quickly and derisively became known as the Commission's "magic bullet" theory: the claim that both Connally and Kennedy were wounded by the same bullet, probably the first Oswald fired. According to the critics,

This vote of no confidence notwithstanding, Howard and Katie drove to Weisberg's farm in western Maryland and spent the afternoon with the king of the critics. Through lunch, Weisberg complained bitterly about the University of Maryland's refusal to accept his donation of the thousands of assassination-related documents he'd collected over the years. When the subject of Donahue's theory finally came up, Weisberg dismissed it out of hand. But despite his earlier claim, he could provide no photographs that refuted the thesis. He did point out that in the Altgens picture, taken just after the first shot was fired, no crack was visible on the limousine windshield. Ergo, Weisberg said, Donahue's belief that the first shot had missed, ricocheted, and struck the windshield with a fragment was unsupported by the photographic record.

Donahue responded by noting that the bright sunlight that day may have made the crack invisible from the front. As well, a bystander wearing white was visible through the windshield at exactly the place where the crack was later found. This likely further masked the presence of the broken glass in the Altgens photo.

Weisberg nonetheless remained adamant in his belief that the head shot came from the front, from the grassy knoll. At one point he leaned forward conspiratorially and told Howard, "I have proof the bullet entered from the front. The wound was surrounded by fragments." Donahue smiled wanly to himself. Weisberg's understanding of the fragments was exactly backward. An M-16 bullet—or any thin-jacketed, high-velocity round—enters the skull, disintegrates, and then deposits fragments on the side opposite from where it enters.

This was clearly demonstrated by the gelatin block tests the House Select Committee had conducted in 1977-78. Photos showed the M-16 round fired by committee marksmen shattered and tumbled after striking the gelatin and caused enormous "tissue" damage before spraying multiple, minute fragments forward, to the front of the block, opposite from the side the bullet entered on. (See illustration 26.)

In fact, the shattering, fragmenting "wound" in the gelatin nearly replicated exactly the one Kennedy suffered, although this was never acknowledged by the committee. Moreover, Donahue knew the only weapon capable of inflicting a frontal wound as massive as Kennedy's would have been a shotgun fired from a few feet away. No shotgun pellets were found in Kennedy's brain and, obviously, no one was seen with a shotgun along Elm Street.

Of course, the gunsmith mentioned none of these troublesome technicalities to Weisberg as the old man held court that afternoon. Donahue did point out that in his opinion, the bullet's trajectory, explosive disintegration and the size of the entrance wound proved Hickey had fired the last shot. He did not, however, belabor the point. It was obvious Weisberg knew absolutely nothing about firearms and ballistics. And it was equally obvious the critic had no desire to begin learning now.

I have never seen any "conclusions" about how Kennedy died. I look at it & I have never advanced any theory!

And so the day faded and Howard and Katie bid the venerable critic good-bye. More than anything else, the Donahues felt sorry for Weisberg as they drove home that evening. Here was a man over seventy years old who'd given a good part of his life to studying the Kennedy assassination. Now his health was failing, the state university couldn't care less about his painstakingly amassed collection of assassination documents and, to top it off, his conclusions about how Kennedy died were flat wrong. *Did they mean he asked me to do it? I'm not sure but I sure think he did!*

Following the encounter with Weisberg, Howard realized he would have to finish the investigation on his own. He knew there was an important subject that needed to be reexamined in greater detail: the Secret Service in general and, in particular, their actions in Dallas. What more could he learn?

Like many twentieth-century American institutions, the Secret Service was forged in the caldron of the Civil War. Originally, the Service was conceived as part of the Treasury Department and charged with investigating and combating currency counterfeiting, which was endemic in the war years. It was not until after the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901 that the agency picked up the additional duty of protecting the President.²

In time the Service would also be responsible for shielding the vice president, the President-elect, major presidential candidates, former Presidents and their wives, widows of former Presidents, presidential children and visiting heads of state.³ The agency also developed a sophisticated research division that today undertakes the daunting task of identifying and monitoring potential assassins. As well, the Service continues to retain authority in cases involving counterfeiting.

But it remains the President's stoic, steadfast bodyguards who dominate the public's perception of the famous organization. The Secret Service agent has emerged as something of an archetypal American hero in recent decades: strong, courageous, and willing to lay down his or her life in the blink of an eye to defend the leader of a free and open society. This image is not exaggerated, for the job is dangerous, difficult and relentlessly stressful. Even in earlier, less violent times, the lot of an agent was a hard one.

Kentuckian Edmund Starling worked on the White House protection detail for thirty years, from 1914 to 1944. His biography, written by Thomas Sugrue in 1946, provides one of the most detailed glimpses of the day-to-day life of an agent. The book captures the atmosphere of grinding pressure agents face as they wrestle with the nearly incompatible goals of protecting the President and allowing the American people a degree of access to their leader.

In one of his many letters home, Starling recounts a typically enervating journey—accompanying President Wilson to Philadelphia for the second game of the World Series in 1915: